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Star Trek's Mirror Universe Episodes and US Military Culture through the Eyes of the Other

1. Alternative Universes: Fiction Within Fiction. Across a vast network of franchised properties, stretching from the original series in 1966-69 to J.J. Abrams's most recent feature films (*Star Trek* [2009] and *Star Trek Into Darkness* [2013]), STAR TREK has grown into an immense "alternative world ... in which most fans would dearly love to live or at least look upon as the ideal" (Geraghty 37). Within this alternative world, individual television episodes have returned to the theme of the alternative universe, positing the "alternative to the alternative" as an embedded diegetic space that simultan-eously differs from and corresponds to the internally coherent world presented across all incarnations of STAR TREK. In fact, in a move that returned the franchise to unexpected box-office success after its much-decried demise with the show *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001-2005), Abrams had grounded *Star Trek* and *Into Darkness* exactly in such an alternative universe. The bifurcation of the series' overarching timeline that occurred in *Star Trek* liberated Abrams's reboot of the franchise from the dictate of internal diegetic consistency while leaving it safely within that larger universe in which, according to Geraghty, "most fans would dearly love to live." As *Into Darkness* availed itself cleverly of the narrative opportunities created by its predecessor, both films' blockbuster success testifies to the creative and commercial potential of alternative universes within all-too-familiar fictional ones.

While alternative universes are a tried-and-true trope of science fiction in general, and STAR TREK has worked through this trope in all its possible varieties, there is one special type of alternative universe—which I will refer to, in reference to an original series' episode title, as a mirror universe—that strikes me as unique to the STAR TREK franchise in its configuration of characteristics. The mirror universe is not just a variation on the familiar diegetic universe but, at least in its intention, its diametric reversal. Its unique features emerge in contrast to the familiar universe, and, through this intertextuality, its function is predominantly didactic in regard to values and ideals of behavior and conduct. And perhaps most idiosyncratically in regard to the STAR TREK franchise, its subject matter invariably involves matters of military hierarchy, discipline, conflict, and political rationale, much of it commenting allegorically on the interactions between the US and other nations in the context of US military action. An episode in the second season of the original series, entitled "Mirror, Mirror" (1967), first introduced the trope. In it, a transporter malfunction switches corresponding characters from two universes, allowing the narrative to crosscut as "our" characters disentangle themselves from their displacement and return to their proper universe. In the episode "Yesterday's Enterprise" (1990) from the third season of *Star Trek:*

The Next Generation (1987-94), the crew of the *Enterprise* encounters a missing ship from the past that has crossed over from a different universe, a crossover that turns reality into an uncannily distorted version of itself until reversed by returning the intruder to its place of origin. And, finally, the fourth and final season of *Enterprise* featured a double episode entitled "In a Mirror Darkly" (2005) that paid homage to the alternative universe from "Mirror, Mirror" by taking place entirely within that universe.[1]

Not surprisingly, fans have a special place in their hearts for these episodes. To the extent that they require a higher degree of familiarity with the *STAR TREK* universe in its normal configuration, they play more to fans than to a general audience. In fact, they specifically extend an invitation, an interpellation, to viewers *as fans*, appealing to an audience Christine Cornea has described as among the most faithful, engaged, and creatively active within sf fandom (8-9). The intertextual play—which, within the confines of the franchise, is really more of an intratextual play—raises the profile of each individual series, under the umbrella of the entire franchise, to a level of self-consciousness that exceeds straightforward dramatic and narrative pleasures. In such episodes the franchise comments upon itself *as a franchise*, an effect to which I will return in my closing remarks.

What is even more striking about these episodes is their thematic continuity. While the four episodes listed above do not constitute a complete account of all moments and movements in which writers and directors have explored the idea of alternative universes within this franchise, I have selected them specifically because they constitute a coherent microscopic text with a clear thematic focus.[2] In all of them, the tenor of the mirror universe is military conflict and, more broadly speaking, militaristic cultures and their underlying ideologies. Each episode features the *STAR TREK* universe at war, the familiar characters re-written as soldiers or warriors, and the familiar connotations of benign, peaceful, and/or well-intentioned institutions reversed. Since one "of the most frequently addressed social problems [in the franchise] was the role of the United States in the world" as well as "the moral dilemmas faced by American foreign policy makers" (Lagon 251), looking at war and the military in the alternative universe episodes sheds additional light on this overriding concern, especially since the four episodes were produced and aired at different times and thus respond, in turn, to contexts marked by specific micro-historical differences and broader macro-historical continuities.

While war and the military have always provided one recurring motif within the *STAR TREK* universe, they constitute *the* single dominant thematic preoccupation in these episodes. More importantly, the existence, design, and ideological content of an uncanny other, which replicates the franchise's diegetic profile through difference rather than continuity, allows for a clearer look at exactly those themes—the militarism that cuts across all manifestations of the franchise—that are consigned to a moderated, even muted existence in other episodes. If *STAR TREK* disavows, denies, or rejects militarism, then these episodes offer a space in which the rules of repression are temporarily suspended. In order to pursue this hypothesis, let me begin by outlining what

I mean by American militarism, especially in regard to the discursive paradigms that constrain its public debate, and how it provides a context for *STAR TREK*, from the Cold War to 9/11.

2. American Militarism: A History of Violence. Historical evidence weighs strongly on the US existing in a persistent state of war throughout what Henry Luce in 1941 famously called the American Century. Starting with the termination of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, the US has pursued an agenda of "maintain[ing] a *global military presence*, [configuring] its forces for *global power projection*, and [countering] existing or anticipated threats by relying on a policy of *global interventionism*" (Bacevich, *Washington Rules* 14; emphasis in original). Within this framework, US troops provided most of the Allied occupational force in Europe and Asia; fought the Korean War (1950-53) and the Vietnam War (1961-73); and deployed in the Iran hostage rescue attempt (1980), the invasion of Grenada (1983), the raid on Tripoli (1986), the invasion of Panama (1989), the Persian Gulf War (1991-92), the invasion of Somalia (1992-93), the invasion of Haiti (1994), the air raids on Bosnia (1995), and Operation "Allied Force" in Kosovo (1999). For the past decade, the US has been waging war in Afghanistan (2001-) and Iraq (2003-), has engaged in military action in Libya (2011), and has repeatedly threatened military action (e.g., in Syria in 2013).[3] Formal declarations of war, as issued at the onset of World Wars I and II, have largely been replaced in the discourse of US foreign relations by a more euphemistic vocabulary that declares war to be a necessary element in the process of "nation building" (war in Iraq 2003-) or a "kinetic military operation" (US military action in Libya, 2011).

Necessary for maintaining this permanent state of war is a national economy that, in 2001, channeled over 300 billion dollars into defense spending, a number that increased to over 700 billion in 2011 ("US Military Expenditure Since 2001"). Consequently, the US makes up about 43% of global military spending, while the next ten countries combined make up only 21.5% ("Global Distribution").[4] The fact that most of the wars in which the US has engaged since WWII are conflicts in which it has enjoyed a vastly asymmetrical military advantage over its enemies contributes to a broad acceptance of war based on the assumption of efficiency free of repercussive impact. "To state the matter bluntly," Andrew Bacevich argues, "Americans in our own time have fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force" (*New American Militarism* 2).

Public debate on these facts takes place within a larger political, cultural, and rhetorical paradigm that demands endorsement of America's global military primacy and thus favors military interventionism, and yet proceeds within a framework of odd strictures and repressive mechanisms enforcing a disavowal of imperial intentions and military aggression. Variable degrees of accepting the military as an indispensable part of the national imaginary apply

across the political spectrum. Doctrinal debates about the true essence of the nation according to its founding fathers (e.g., as Republic or Empire), or about the strategic framework of American foreign politics (e.g., whether the Bush doctrine is to be preferred over Cold War "containment"), never advance past the baseline assumptions that war is the continuation of diplomacy by other means, that it is, or should be, a nation's last resort in its defense or, at its worst, a necessary evil. Within these parameters, public debate may address military spending, the pragmatics of military intervention, and the success or failure of specific military actions; it may lament the loss of, primarily, American lives; it may decry methods and strategy of warfare. No debate exceeding these boundaries takes place inside the mainstream.[5]

Compared to other science fiction in the media mainstream—from the television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) and *Space: Above and Beyond* (1995-1996) to the later *STAR WARS* franchise (1977-2014)—the early *STAR TREK* franchise (1966-2013) is not explicitly militaristic. It does not glorify military aggression; in fact, it often problematizes and rejects it as a means of conflict resolution. Its narratives and characters are not primarily associated with war and the military—none of this is an important part of its brand. And yet war and the military have found their way into *STAR TREK* by way of the franchise's historical context. Given its release date, starting in 1966, it is hardly surprising that the original series, with its fictional universe divided between the benevolent Federation of Planets and the aggressive, devious, expansionist Klingon Empire, reproduces the fundamental Cold War dichotomy. Few episodes directly address this larger context of competing empires—and sometimes this topic surfaces as a mere backdrop (as, for example, in the "Trouble with Tribbles" episode [1967]), and yet it provides an organizing structure for the series' larger fictional universe. Similarly, *The Next Generation*, with its multiple species warring for galactic dominance, reflects a complex world more attuned to the late stages of the Cold War and the first decade of post-Cold War American policy, a heritage passed on most explicitly to *Deep Space Nine* (1993-99). The loss of a master narrative for American militarism might be reflected in *Deep Space Nine*'s adoption of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a backdrop (in the war between the Bajorans and the Cardassians and the occupation of the former by the latter), a regional conflict lacking the apocalyptic grandeur of the Cold War yet manifesting anxieties about regional conflicts, their human cost, and their potential to destabilize regions of great political significance and interest. Re-aligning *STAR TREK*'s latest television incarnation with its vast franchise predecessors, the makers of *Enterprise*, which "debuted just three weeks before the repeated televisual display of the 9/11 attacks" (Sharon Sharp 27), not only asked "viewers to engage in a comparative logic with the utopian future represented in *Star Trek*, *Star Trek: Next Generation*, and so on" (33), but they also constructed a "regressive allegory that reference[d] cold war rhetoric, the Bush administration's response to 9/11 and the reactionary turn of post-9/11 American politics and culture" (34), offering an overarching storyline about a temporal Cold War in which the

crew of the *Enterprise* must engage after a devastating attack on Earth by an alien race.[6]

While military conflict seems to enter the diegesis of STAR TREK almost inevitably by way of its historical and cultural context, Gene Roddenberry is widely credited with giving the franchise, in an oppositional gesture to what might be construed as American militarism, an overarching profile defined by optimism, humanism, and tolerance toward matters of cultural, racial, and sexual difference.[7] In fact, much critical writing on STAR TREK foregrounds the original series' progressive social and racial politics, which, in retrospect, appear less attuned to the Kennedy administration's military aggressiveness and more to the countercultural roots of the period.[8] While demands for dramatic action may skew the franchise toward military adventure, Roddenberry's vision was one that favored peaceful exploration as the engine driving the narrative (encapsulated famously by the concept for *Star Trek* being "*Wagon Train* to the Stars"). Still, the question remains: given that the "continuing mission" of the starship *Enterprise* is "to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations" and "to boldly go where no man has gone before," why does the "uniformed, militarily-hierarchical crew of *Star Trek*'s *Enterprise* often [do battle], despite its nominally peaceful aims"? (Rabkin). This paradox at the heart of the franchise provides entry into the alternative universe episodes.[9]

3. STAR TREK's Dark Double: Learning from the Other. In "Mirror, Mirror," an ion storm causes a transporter malfunction that has four crew members trade places across two universes, each of which is, as the title of the episode has it, the mirror image of the other. Dramatically, the episode follows the plan of the characters to return to their own universe in a race against time and obstacles of all kinds. More importantly, though, the episode, which takes place almost exclusively in the alternative universe, presents this universe as a coherent counter-vision that negates everything Roddenberry has fixed as constants for what was to become the franchise. Within the context of a negotiation between the Federation and an alien culture, the Halkans, the episode explores primarily the social and professional order on board the *Enterprise*, the hierarchical system of authority as a reflection of the larger political and institutional context in which the ship and its crew operate.

Difference is marked first by alterations in the costumes and the ship's internal spaces. Women's costumes are two-part outfits with bare midriffs, halter tops that display upper arms and neck as well as décolletage, and thigh-high leather boots. Crew and officers wear military medals, signs of rank and a metallic sash, and carry a dagger. The ship's interior is decorated with non-functional visual elements, a style departing from the simple, modernist functionality of the "real" *Enterprise*. Most notable is the ubiquity of a symbol adorning the walls—an abstract representation of the Earth with a dagger piercing it vertically. Further Nazi symbolism is added with the crew's greeting—a raised arm similar to the Roman greeting adopted by Nazi

Germany as the Hitler salute—and the presence of Gestapo-like security police spying on everyone on board.

If visual elements announce savagery, barbarity, and aggressive military swagger, character interaction exacerbates this indictment. In the alternate universe, the United Federation of Planets is now "the Empire," and crew members advance their careers by sabotaging or assassinating their superiors, who retaliate against challenges to their merciless authority with torture and execution. Discipline is enforced by fear and terror or shared greed, not by mutual respect. Missions are inevitably military in nature, with crewmembers profiting personally and monetarily from their success. Sexuality, announced in the costuming of (primarily) female bodies, also serves as a means of advancing personal interests; sexuality is the common coin of advancement across gender lines, and commanding officers are entitled to sexual companions who share in their power but pursue interests beyond personal loyalty.

More interesting than the internal workings of the *Enterprise* for the purpose of this discussion is the interaction with the Halkans, who refuse to yield, out of immutable moral convictions, to the Empire's demand for valuable dilithium crystals. The situation, in short, is one of asymmetrical, colonial, or postcolonial conflict. To clarify how the Empire's method for achieving compliance differs from that of the Federation, the episode opens with a brief scene in "our" universe in which we see Captain Kirk negotiating with the Halkans. When the leader of the Halkan Council concedes, "You do have the might to take the crystals by force," Kirk responds: "But we won't consider that," spelling out the political position of the Federation. Transposed to the alternative universe, Kirk discovers that the Empire's way of dealing with the same situation is to destroy the Halkans from orbit. "Terror must be maintained or the Empire is doomed," the alternative Spock states categorically. The contrast between both scenes is clearly intended to be didactic: viewers get to see the same situation play out, somewhat heavy-handedly, once "the right way" and once "the wrong way."

In this interplay with the mirror universe, the episode articulates a clear list of positive values America is, or should be, embracing: democratic decision-making, authority based on mutual respect, the pursuit of shared goals based on internalized consent, rejection of cruelty and torture, privileging of negotiation over aggression in the pursuit of political and economic goals, managing sexuality within proper social and economic structures, and foregoing the advantages of one's own technological superiority in the interest of peaceful co-existence with other nations. There is also a sense that the vicious in-fighting among crew members for personal advantage is wasteful; cooperation based on rational shared interest is not just moral, it is also more efficient. This is not to say that these values always and unambiguously prevail within the *STAR TREK* universe. The dramatic narrative of individual episodes may explore or even complicate their origins or the consequences of their implementation. Critical discourse has also pointed out how ideological subtext may deviate from explicitly stated textual intentions.[10] Nonetheless, what invariably remains intact is their status as positive values to be announced as

part of a deliberate political agenda. They may not be a concrete reality, but they are an ideal toward which to strive.

In the articulation and legitimization of these values, the use of the mirror universe is fairly transparent. The mirror universe is a negative version, and thus a reverse affirmation—an ontological and thematic deictic, if you will—of the positive values the series associates with the US. By showing the opposite of everything the crew of the *Enterprise* and the Federation represent, the mirror universe reaffirms these values. The qualities rejected by the series and projected onto the mirror universe are clearly drawn from an imagination that conflates the Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union, with the old World War II enemy, Nazi Germany.[11] By othering the Empire in this hyperbolic two-fold manner, the mirror universe conflates the way things *are* with the way things *ought to be* within the construction of political subjectivity. The constant acknowledgment that humans (i.e., Americans) are imperfect or flawed—not by coincidence does "Mirror, Mirror" end with a scene in which Spock, from the lofty perspective of Vulcan objectivity, indicts humanity for its shortcomings—serves as a mechanism for the disavowal of this idealization. Humanity, like America, is not perfect, but its goodness consists in its striving for perfection, in its ambitions and its ideals (more than its actions?).

While this desire for moral improvement, construed almost as a human characteristic and not a cultural idiosyncrasy, is lacking from the mirror universe where humanity seems to revel in its baseness and profligacy, the episode concludes with a few loose ends that suggest the possibility of a gradual improvement of matters (i.e., a process by which the mirror universe gradually sheds its otherness and comes to resemble the proper universe). Individual characters such as the alternative Spock, who remain within the mirror universe, may abandon its objectionable standards and start acting in accord with reason, rationality, and moral integrity; if successful, they may be the seeds of reform.

The episode "Yesterday's Enterprise" from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* works through many of the same ideas. Again, the encounter with a mirror universe revolves around military conflict. The *Enterprise* encounters one of its predecessors that had been destroyed, or gone missing, twenty-two years earlier. The moment this ship enters through one of the time warps common in the *STAR TREK* franchise, "our" universe is suddenly rendered unfamiliar. Without anyone being aware that this change has occurred (with one notable exception), the crew of the *Enterprise* is now a warship for the Federation of Planets involved in a twenty-two-year-long war with the Klingon Empire.

As in "Mirror, Mirror," the ontological doubling is conceptualized first by visual means. Changes in uniforms this time are minor: crewmembers carry side arms at all times and collars appear to be higher. The lighting of the ship's interiors is decreased; a more expressionistic style, using key lights and dark backdrops, replaces the otherwise common visuals of the series, visuals that prefer a bright, even, and somewhat flat lighting of all interior spaces. Now, low- and high-angle lighting dramatizes interiors and characters within them; shadows are lengthened, characters are shot against black backdrops.

Dialogue communicates further details of this mirror universe. The *Enterprise* now carries up to 6,000 troops, but no longer holds families and children. It is a ship of war, no longer one of peace. Captain Picard's log entries are in a "Military Log" that assigns each a "Combat Date." The war is going badly for the Federation: forty billions have died, and defeat or surrender is imminent within half a year. All this time, we learn, the war against the Klingons could have been avoided if only a Federation ship had protected a Klingon outpost when it was attacked by the Romulans, either because the failure of that intervention would have been seen as an honorable sacrifice by the Klingons, or because its success would have turned animosity into alliance. Either way, with the war being the result of a missed opportunity for a military intervention, the episode makes the case for foreign military intervention not so much as the lesser of two military evils but as a moral imperative—an argument that is difficult not to read in the light of over half a century of American foreign policy, from the Truman to the Bush doctrines.

While this episode steers clear of the dystopian hyperbole characterizing the alternative universe in "Mirror, Mirror," it nonetheless has a clear message: the state of affairs now accepted by everyone as normal is, in fact, an aberration. The single character sensing the slip into the other universe is Guinan (Whoopie Goldberg), who, time and again, reiterates that "this is all wrong" or "this is a mistake." Among characters oblivious to the possibility that there is more than one reality, Guinan serves as the point of entry for the viewer who shares her cognitive superiority. Guinan announces the truth about the *STAR TREK* universe: the *Enterprise* is not a warship; a state of war constitutes an aberration for the Federation, even if it is not a war of aggression; and prolonged warfare in general is, in Guinan's words, "not the way it's supposed to be."

More suitable to the topic is the double episode "In a Mirror Darkly" of the most recent entry in the *STAR TREK* series, *Star Trek: Enterprise*. As the episode's title announces, this is a deliberate metafictional reflection upon the series' own status as part of the franchise by way of its inter/-intratextual play with the by-now canonical "Mirror, Mirror" episode of the original series. The double episode also harkens back to a formative moment in the future history of the franchise, depicted in one of the feature films, *First Contact* (1996): humanity's first alien encounter, a Sistine Chapel moment in which superior Vulcans raise the dregs of humanity up into the pantheon of space-faring species. *Enterprise* rewrites this friendly encounter so that the humans instead kill the Vulcans, take their technology, and erect exactly that galactic empire we have seen in "Mirror, Mirror," complete with the familiar imperial logo; the vicious infighting among the crew for power, career advancement, and sexual gratification; and "the booth," an infamous instrument of torture. Small details vary—e.g., uniforms are only slightly altered, women's uniforms still have the bare midriff, while men's haircuts are gelled into a semblance of 1960s military buzz cuts—but by and large *Enterprise* sets out to re-create the original series' mirror universe with striking intertextual fidelity.

Given its late arrival within the franchise, *Enterprise* has the advantage of selectively supplementing the alternative universe created in the original series. One thematic facet that is largely absent from the original series is the racism of all interactions within the Empire. Aside from a sado-masochistic encounter between Sulu (George Takei) and Uhura (Nichelle Nichols), which may simply be inadvertently racist, the original series limited itself to the colonial overtones in the Empire's dealings with the Halkans. Among the crew, however, rank trumped race. Not so in *Enterprise*, where human domination of other species is presented in overtly chauvinistic terms whenever human and alien crewmembers interact with each other; Archer himself refers to all aliens dismissively as "a bunch of subhuman species."[12] Consequently, much of the episodes' plot revolves around subversion and sabotage committed against the Empire by an alliance of non-human species planning an insurgence against human domination. Racism also plays a role in the brutal torture of an alien prisoner of war by the crew of the *Enterprise*, a scene that draws far more attention to the use of torture than anything in the original series. Beyond marking the general inhumanity of the Empire, torture ties in with the adoption of Nazi imagery by *Enterprise*; the ship's doctor, for example, is shown not only complicit in torture but, like a concentration camp scientist, engaged in gruesome experiments on living specimens on various occasions.

Another specific idea added by *Enterprise* to the original series, extrapolated from the theme of racism, is the acknowledgment that knowledge about the "correct" STAR TREK universe, with its benevolent inter-species collaboration, would be dangerous and subject to political censorship within the repressive racist Empire of the alternative universe. Given the opportunity, characters examine the life and career of their corresponding selves in the alternative universe. The destabilizing effects of the utopian alternatives revealed by such individual research, however, are recognized as having subversive power. A military dictatorship cannot tolerate the existence of such seditious thought.

Most striking among the changes the later series imposes onto the creation of the earlier one is the opening credit sequence (which remained unaffected in "Mirror, Mirror"). After the lettering of the show's title switches in the opening shot from white to black, the abstract principle behind the credits remains the same: a montage of images depicting technological progress—most, but not all, American—accompanied by a rousing country power ballad about realizing one's dream, fulfilling one's (manifest?) destiny, and having "faith of the heart." The alternative sequence replaces this upbeat musical soundtrack with a rousing orchestral score based on a military drumbeat, sequencing images that shift quickly from exploration to domination and aggression: war ships, tanks, submarines, military planes, mushroom clouds. Images are differently sourced; World War II footage features German Stukas, but much of the military hardware shown in action is, in fact, American. Even more significant is the fact that as soon as recorded history is extrapolated into fictional future history, the credits use images produced specifically for *Enterprise* itself. Here, the sequence re-contextualizes scenes of hand-to-hand

combat or space battles from earlier episodes, creating a new text that revises Roddenberry's humanist space adventure into right-wing Heinleinian space war. Two striking implications emerge from this sequence: how virtually indistinguishable technological progress—American or otherwise—is from military applications, and how deeply complicit the series' own iconography is in the celebration of this form of militarism. As much as *STAR TREK* might have been patting itself on the back for sounding that mighty call to freedom feared and repressed by dictatorships everywhere, it is the revised credit sequence that hints at complicity between *STAR TREK* and the spirit of American military aggression.

4. Thinking about *STAR TREK*: With or Against the Grain? Many critics have noted that Roddenberry's vision of the *STAR TREK* universe is not primarily a critical commentary on America or, more specifically, on American military power and its use. In one episode or another, the franchise may refer to the evils of war, but even these isolated instances take place within a broader paradigm that assumes America's essential goodness, or at least its good intentions, even—or especially—when it is resorting to military power in pursuit of these ideals. This assumption, derived from the various historical micro-contexts (of, respectively, the Cold War, the immediate post-Cold War period, and the post-9/11 "war on terror"), is as much part of the allegorical text in *STAR TREK* as Roddenberry's explicit authorial agenda. No matter whether the series treats these two layers as congruent or as conflicting, their interplay provides opportunities to argue in favor of a national imaginary that is more America's better self, its utopian potential, than the subject of its actual *realpolitical* record and the political agent with which other nations deal on a daily basis. Within this larger framework, the alternate universe serves merely as an instrument for "defining what constitutes a utopia through its absence" (Jenkins 190). The incongruity between ideal and reality tends to come across as hypocrisy, in *STAR TREK* as much as in American politics. "Scholars [of *STAR TREK*] and policy makers alike have formulated elaborate pretexts for [the] hypocrisy" that becomes visible whenever the US is "criticizing the human rights record of sovereign nations or invading a nation in the name of security" while insisting that its own stance is one of non-interference in the sovereignty of other nations, much like the mandate of the fictional Prime Directive (Lagon 252). From the perspective of the other, both the hypocrisy and the "elaborate pretexts for [the] hypocrisy" constitute US domestic debate about military power.

Against this backdrop, *STAR TREK*'s mirror universe episodes appear almost radical in their disagreement with the larger franchise's general political tone.[13] They seem to give voice exactly to that position of the other, the point of view from outside the paradigm. In the alternative universe, the US is everything its harshest critics say it is: a committed imperial power expanding its territorial reach at every opportunity, pursuing its aims by speaking softly and carrying a big stick, a purveyor of gunboat diplomacy or, if all else fails, open aggression. It does not even shy away from torture, infusing its relations with

other nations with racism, aligning its technological progress with military funding, development, and use; it exists in a state of perpetual war, a condition not forced upon it by conditions beyond its control but actively pursued by internal forces bent upon personal and collective advancement. Given the nation's history of military actions, invasions, and occupations, it is more difficult to accept Roddenberry's benevolent assessment of US policy than its reversal in the mirror universe.

As far as the representations of internal hierarchies among the various crews are concerned—the infighting, the brutal rivalries, the sabotage and assassination attempts—the alternative universe episodes also provide an outsider's view. In the context of the Cold War, the original series clearly differentiates between military hierarchies that derive structure and coherence from coercion, like those of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and those that function through natural authority and mutual respect. As Rabkin's comments on *STAR TREK*'s inherent militarism indicate, however, democratic decision-making has always been a rather transparent cover for the underlying military order on board the *Enterprise*: a Captain's order *is* a Captain's order—autocracy, not democracy, is the principle of military discipline.[14] Insisting upon the absence of coercion in light of this underlying military regime requires a mechanism of disavowal; the neoliberal vision of the self-contained, self-motivated, and yet socially integrated member of a team that no longer requires extraneous coercion provides exactly this mechanism.[15] The simultaneous display and disavowal of sexuality in the play between the regular and the alternative *STAR TREK* universe—what really is the difference between the female crew members' uniforms in both universes?— coercion is everywhere and, thus, nowhere at all.

In trying to make sense of the mirror universe episodes, the most obvious interpretive route leads toward psychoanalysis. In regard to their position within the *STAR TREK* franchise at large, alternative universes function, to use Sander Gilman's terminology, as the "bad other," expressing "repressed sadistic impulses" and "that which we fear to become" (20). Within the larger realm of American *realpolitik*, impulses may not be sadistic, but even if aggression in the pursuit of political and economic goals is "merely" pragmatic, discursive repression of this aggression ensures the continuation of an idealized self-image. Allan Asherman moves this psychoanalytic reading more explicitly toward politics in his comments on "Mirror, Mirror": "Coming face-to-face with your hidden, inner drives is something many people pay vast sums of money to arrange via psychoanalysis" as the "parallel-Federation becomes the equivalent of our Klingons, Romulans, and ancient brigands all rolled into one aggressive package" (81). Politically speaking, this moment of coming "face-to-face with your hidden, inner drives" challenges the boundary between self and other. If this were a radical step within the context of the Cold War, it would become less so in the context of America's military efforts to maintain imperial ambitions after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Given its air date, four years into the Bush administration's so-called war on terror, the double episode "In a Mirror Darkly" might go furthest in

expressing unease with American militarism, even though it is *Enterprise* that has been in critics' sights for turning back the clock on some of the franchise's more progressive politics and bending the series into an uncharacteristically conservative posture. Though the series repeatedly returns to the ideals of "progressive multiculturalism" that characterized the original series, Sharon Sharp points out how *Enterprise* mobilizes such gestures "in service of whiteness and the white male hero" (37).[16] Lincoln Geraghty paraphrases Donna Minkowitz's criticism of the series as "champion[ing] white supremacism with its harsh depiction of the Vulcans as dominators who stand in the way of human creativity," a racist undertone emphatically exposed and condemned in the series' very own alternative universe episodes (139). In fact, the "alien-hating and macho heroism" in *Enterprise* (qtd. in Geraghty 139), which Minkowitz sees as a reflection of US post-9/11 xenophobia and military aggression, are very much the target of criticism in "Through a Mirror Darkly."

In the final instance, however, I believe that reading *STAR TREK*'s alternative universe episodes as spaces of desublimation (to use Marcusian terminology), as spaces of the carnivalesque (Bakhtinian terminology), spaces in which the repressed can temporarily return (in the Freudian sense)—in short, spaces in which US militarism can encounter itself as other—means reading them against the grain. This is not because they fail to give voice to the disconcerting and destabilizing subjectivity of the other; it is because their radical progressive or pacifist content can only emerge as long as we ignore the mechanisms of disavowal that surround them and neutralize them by re-absorbing their transgressive potential back into the franchise's larger discursive paradigm. Let me give some examples of what these mechanisms of disavowal look like.

For one, there is the fact that alternative universe episodes constitute a miniscule percentage of the *STAR TREK* franchise. Even for fans who embrace these episodes wholeheartedly, their confirmation of certain values by playfully yet demonstrably, even didactically, reversing them is much more obvious than their negation such that it would be an insignificant minority who actually read these episodes in this manner. It stands to reason that *Star Trek* fans become fans because they enlist in Roddenberry's positive vision, not its reversal. Ultimately, it is easier to see these episodes underwriting Roddenberry's vision by "defining what constitutes a utopia through its absence" (Jenkins 190) than going against the franchise's interpretive grain.

Second, tonal differences among several of the episodes further undercut their transgressive potential. While, for example, *The Next Generation* and *Voyager* handle their material with great dramatic, even tragic seriousness, both *Star Trek* and *Enterprise* add elements of camp. The fact, for example, that Captain Archer's pet Beagle in "In a Mirror Darkly" turns into a Rottweiler in the mirror universe; or the discovery that literary characters are less benign in the mirror universe except in the works of Shakespeare, which are "equally grim in both universes," as one character puts it; or the tongue-in-cheek banter between Spock and Kirk that closes the original series' episode—all of this suggest that writers and directors are aware of the

preposterousness of their premise, the extravagance of its execution, and the unspoken agreement with an audience of insiders to ignore the political in favor of the inter-/intratextual.

Even when the more playful elements are not camp, *Enterprise* is such a late entry in the STAR TREK franchise that it bears the substantial inter-/intratextual burden of its deep and complex embedding within the overall fabric. Much in the double episode is a direct reference to its predecessor, a relationship announced by the similarities between its title and "Mirror, Mirror." For example, *Enterprise* revisits the racist/sado-masochistic flirtation between Sulu and Uhura by flipping it along its axes of both gender and race, re-imagining Sulu, the Asian crewmember, as Hoshi Sato (Linda Park), a shy and somewhat submissive young woman, and turning her into a power-hungry femme fatale. The point about gender and race is made, and yet the switch from one Orientalist stereotype to another—from the demure Asian woman according to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* to the "dragon lady" from the world of Sax Rohmer—is performed so bluntly, the two complementary stereotypes arranged with such symmetrical precision, that it functions both as an intertextual commentary on the predecessor and an indictment of the underlying cultural mechanism. The self-reflexive commentary does not negate the political point, but to the extent that the scene plays to a fan audience, it re-routes interpretive effort from the political to the metafictional.

On yet another textual level, political desublimation is undercut by the obvious pleasure STAR TREK derives from—and invests in—military spectacle, regardless of whether it occurs in the dystopian alternative universe or the "correct" one. Having validated the need and beneficial outcome of military intervention as a principle of foreign policy, the episode "Yesterday's Enterprise" (1990) concludes with a climactic action sequence in which the *Enterprise* does battle with three Klingon ships trying to prevent the ship from the past from returning through the temporal rift. As if thrilling military adventure in a supposedly peaceful fictional universe were not troubling enough, Captain Picard has a swashbuckling moment when he takes the helm of the ship as it heads toward destruction in a blaze of glory, muttering "That'll be the day!"—a scene that signals, if nothing else, the pleasure of aggression within the realm of military adventure. The reference to the immortal John Wayne line also adds that element of camp I mentioned before. The same undercutting of dystopian condemnation by means of spectacle and action also occurs in the double episode of *Enterprise*, which is rife with visually thrilling, suspenseful, rousing space battles, regardless of the moral rights or wrongs of those engaged in them. We might find the alternative Captain Archer morally repellent, but his action sequences are pure visual pleasure.

In the final instance, we might want to return to Herbert Marcuse's terminology in the assessment of these episodes, and see them as what Marcuse would have considered examples of repressive desublimation—i.e., gestures that appear to "extend liberty while intensifying domination" (72).[17] Where some critics see the possibility that, in much of popular culture, narrative re-

containment of subversive content is never really successful (because, once allowed articulation, the power of this content to disrupt, undercut, and haunt the text exceeds the contrived, formulaic, and mechanical form of genre fiction), Marcuse cautions against assigning too much significance to the power of the residual, marginal, or subliminal. Especially within the context of *STAR TREK*'s fan audience—fully competent in reading the franchise's meta-textual dimension, and embedded, to one degree or another, within the dominant discourse on American militarism—the mirror universe episodes gesture toward the release of repressed content, announce and even stage subversion and transgression, but then re-contextualize that moment of release in a manner that immediately reabsorbs it into the larger mechanism of repression that has structured, invisibly, its appearance all along. This mechanism seems to work smoothly as long as the larger debate about the US military remains contained with the conventional discursive paradigm prevalent, one would assume, primarily for the franchise's original US audience. Given the popularity of the *STAR TREK* franchise as a cultural export—and J.J. Abrams's two recent *Star Trek* films have elevated the franchise to the level of global blockbuster—one cannot help wondering if audiences outside the US would see it this way, too. *STAR TREK* fans outside the US, who are no less enthusiastic and creative in their responses to the universe imagined by Roddenberry than their domestic counterparts, may have reasons of their own why the alternative universe episodes would be among their favorites. The "subversive potential" that Sharon Sharp sees so woefully neglected in *Enterprise* may be realized after all, albeit from outside the boundaries of the discursive paradigm that regulates the American self-image when it comes to the nation's military presence in the rest of the world.

NOTES

1. An episode of *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001) entitled "Living Witness" (29 Apr. 1998) is also relevant here. The episode described the collective memory of an alien race that came into contact with *Voyager* a long time ago, a history so distorted that it functions as an alternative universe in and of itself. Though the concept of the alternative universe applies only figuratively to this episode, it adds a valuable modification to the concept while reiterating all these major points. The peaceful starship is turned into a warship, its crew's personalities darkened and rendered selfish and aggressive, Star Fleet uniforms altered, and internal lighting suitably dimmed. What initially appears as an alternative universe is, however, revealed to be a computer simulation constructed for archival purposes by another species misremembering their encounter with *Voyager*. Though the simulation is quickly exposed as such, and the misreading of *Voyager*'s role in a military conflict is corrected by the ship's holographic doctor, the brief forays into an outsider's construction of the familiar reverberates with the perception of military aggression. Setting the other's bad memory right is what returns things to their normal state.

2. For relevant episodes in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-99), see Geraghty (52-54).

3. Bacevich's tally ends up being even higher, especially since the end of the Cold War, when he counts nine major operations until 2006, which makes America going to war "just about an annual event" ("Conversation").

4. Exempt from the figures for "US Military Expenditure Since 2001" are all activities related to nuclear weapons, an area in which the US is the global leader.

5. For a more detailed discussion of American militarism, especially in regard to science fiction, see Hantke.

6. As Sharon Sharp points out, the mirror universe episode of *Enterprise* is embedded within a larger narrative arc, focused primarily on season 2 of the series, which already figures "a militarised response echoing the 'war on terror' [and in which] the *Enterprise* [is] outfitted with a fleet of Space Marines" (34).

7. A more self-conscious, critical attempt at defining authorship for the franchise may see Roddenberry more akin to Foucault's "author function," a necessary fiction to maintain a recognizable profile for the franchise as a commodity, a media brand. For an extensive discussion of Foucault's author function and the role of Gene Roddenberry in relation to the STAR TREK franchise, see Jenkins (186-91).

8. See, for example, Johnson-Smith, who focuses the discussion of *Star Trek* on race and gender (77-83), and even distances it thematically from "Military History and Ideology" in sf television by discussing these matters in a separate chapter (119-159).

9. It is important to note that as a vast collaborative effort, the STAR TREK franchise is not as ideologically coherent as the notion of Roddenberry as author would suggest. Johnson-Smith points out that *The Next Generation* features critical references "to the clear-cut ideology of the original *Star Trek*," while *Deep Space Nine* abandoned its immediate predecessor's optimism in favor of "a darker, politically astute and gradually more thread [sic] based story" and *Voyager* provided "a nostalgic return to the grand old days of Kirk's considerably less politically aware exploits. Forged in the heat of the cold war and the new frontier politics of Kennedy, the *Star Trek* universe had nowhere else to go" (115-16).

10. See, for example, Johnson-Smith (82-84) on the ambiguities surrounding the series' often praised racial agenda, which, on the one hand, posits ethnic diversity as a positive value, but, on the other, subsumes this diversity under the ideological primacy of masculinity and whiteness.

11. Not surprisingly, *Enterprise* features a double episode ("Storm Front") in which "Nazis are working with yet another alien race that has manipulated the timeline in order to win the temporal cold war in the future"; in this manner, Sharon Sharp argues, the series "eschews the ambiguity of the contemporary war on terror for a historical period when enemies and heroes were more clearly defined in the popular imagination" (36). The fact that "Mirror, Mirror" performs a similar operation in regard to the Soviet Union and the framework of the Cold War testifies to a larger discursive mechanism based on historical analogy in which a new enemy is vilified by association with an already familiar one.

12. For an extensive discussion of the nexus of race and American exceptionalism and frontier mythology, especially in the context of the Cold War, see Patrick B. Sharp.

13. The "Living Witness" episode (1998) of *Voyager* goes furthest in invalidating the voice of the other. It resolves the alarming vision of *Voyager* and its crew as ruthless aggressors as a misconstrued collective memory; the aliens simply remember history "wrong," and so their alternative universe, figuratively speaking, is erased when proper memory prevails.

14. More extraneous factors may also make a difference. *Enterprise*, for example, may be returning to the original series' alternative universe because it provides a setting for the same intense exploration of power politics—a power politics diametrically opposed to Roddenberry's benign collaborative vision—that, during the

same time, was garnering cable shows such as *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), and *Deadwood* (2004-2006) great critical and popular acclaim.

15. Judith Barad sees leadership in the franchise as a matter of determining the common good, a value masking the underlying idea of natural leadership insinuated by the fact that "all aboard the ship accept and agree that only Kirk is best suited to be captain" and that therefore the "barbaric parallel universe where *everyone* wants to be captain" deconstructs Kirk's leadership qualities by showing the alternative Kirk as a raving, power-hungry despot (84; emphasis in original).

16. Sharp's criticism is particularly noteworthy because she frames her discussion of the conservative politics of *Enterprise* by way of the series' retrofuturism, a posture that can "have progressive and regressive ideological implications" as it figures an imaginary future "through representations of past iconic visions of the future"—in this case the original *Star Trek* from the 1960s (26). Though *Enterprise* is, as I have shown, not without traces of an "'ironic stance' that holds the possibility for subversive potential," Sharp also arrives at the final assessment—albeit without considering in full the mirror universe episode of that series—that *Enterprise*, in the final instance, fails to live up to this "subversive potential" (26).

17. Though Marcuse bases the concept specifically on the Freudian mechanism of sexual repression, it is transferable, in its basic structure and effect, to political discourse as well, a discourse that comes with its own repressed, unspeakable, and unmentionable contents.

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ABSTRACT
Across the vast STAR TREK franchise, a small number of television episodes have used
the device of the alternative universe, or "mirror universe," to comment specifically
on war and the military. In contrast to the general political stance of the franchise,
these episodes provide an embedded dystopian counter-narrative, legitimized by playful
diametric reversal, which replaces the benign vision of peaceful exploration and co-
existence with one of ruthless imperialist aggression. Conscious of their transgressive
impact, these episodes encourage readings against the grain, yet contain such readings
by re-absorbing them into the larger discursive paradigm of American military power.